

Saudi Arabian Scholarship Students in MELP's IEP: Goals, Successes,  
and Challenges

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the perceptions of Saudi Arabian recipients of the King Abdullah Scholarship studying in the Intensive English Program at the University of Minnesota. It provides insight about their goals, the challenges they face, and the success they achieve, as well as their perceptions of the IEP program itself. Using qualitative analysis methods, the results of individual interviews conducted with the participants were examined in order to learn about these perceptions as described by the participants themselves. In general, there is remarkably little research targeting this particular population, and this study takes steps towards filling that gap. The study finds that the participants' goals and experiences are diverse in terms of both their specificity and their chosen fields of study. It also finds that their perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses are highly insightful, and that they may run counter to commonly held beliefs. The successes and challenges discussed by the participants also go far beyond language to include cultural exchange, living independently, and administrative issues. In addition, the study finds that the participants have generally positive perceptions of the IEP program, and that they are adaptive to their environment at the same time that their individual and national identities are being shaped and continuing to evolve. Finally, the study indicates some implications for teachers and administrators regarding the explicitness of expectations, the awareness of the challenges students face, and the development of personal relationships for the benefit of student learning.

*Key words:* Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah Scholarship Program, IEP

## **Introduction**

Since 2005, The University of Minnesota's Minnesota English Language Program (MELP) and other Intensive English Programs (IEPs) around the country have experienced an unprecedented influx of students coming from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Many of these students come to the United States to study with the aid of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), which is administered by SACM, the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission. As of 2012, as many as 68,000 KASP recipients were studying in American Universities, colleges, private language institutes, and IEPs (Kurtz, 2012). These scholarship students experience unique successes and they face a unique set of challenges. This paper explores the students' perspectives of those experiences.

The recent influx of Saudi students seems unlikely to end any time soon because the KASP has recently been extended until at least 2020 ("extension of," 2013). Considering how drastically the makeup of the student body has changed in recent years, it seems fair to assume that teachers, administrators, and others have questions about this population. Teachers and staff in IEPs would benefit greatly from an increased understanding of the educational background Saudi students come from, what their goals are, and how we can help them to achieve those goals.

At the 2013 TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) convention, multiple presentations focused on the Saudi population, and although this paper focuses specifically on the IEP at the University of Minnesota, it is clear that IEPs all over the country are seeking answers to these same questions. This paper seeks to be a timely, pragmatic, and practical effort to understand the challenges being faced as well as the successes being achieved by these

students and will hopefully indicate some directions for future improvement in how MELP serves this population.

## **Literature Review**

### **Background of Educational, Social, and Economic Factors in KSA**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) officially came into existence as a nation in 1932 (Al-Abdulkareem, n.d.). It may, in some ways, be perceived as a nation of contradictions: It is the birthplace of Islam and of the Prophet Mohammad, and previous to the massive urbanization and development spurred by the expansion of the country's oil economy, which began in 1938, the nation was made up almost entirely of tribal groups of nomadic and semi-nomadic people and was very poor (Alamri 2011, Al-Abdulkareem, n.d.). However, since the discovery of oil, the nation has experienced dramatic growth in its GDP, population, and foreign investment (Sedgwick, 2001). It is a nation deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, while at the same time participating actively in world markets and currently focusing on the development of a new "knowledge economy" or "knowledge society," as it is sometimes called (Reisberg, 2011, Hilal, 2013). It is a nation that looks to the future, while maintaining a long and conservative relationship with the past. It is "the starkest mix of medieval and modern of any country in the world" (Coleman, 2012).

While KSA is hardly the only modern Islamic state, it is, in some ways, unique. KSA is "an Islamic state, in which *Shari'ah* (Islamic holy law) serves as both constitution and legal framework. The *Wahhabi* interpretation of Sunni Islam is the official religion and is strictly enforced" (Sedgwick, 2001). *Wahhabism* is "an austere form of Islam that insists on a literal interpretation of the Koran" ("Analysis wahhabism," 2014). This strict interpretation of Islamic law shapes every facet of Saudi society, but it may be most visible to outsiders in terms of how it

deals with gender. Saudi women are not allowed to drive cars, and are required wear the *abaya* (a loose, robe-like black dress) and to be accompanied by a *Mahraram* (a male guardian) at all times when in public. Women occupy a separate, and some would say inferior, space in Saudi society (Doumato, 2003). In schools, women study separately from men, and they also attend mosque and work separately from their male counterparts.

There are many more examples of how *wahhabism* and *shari'ah* are visible and dominant in Saudi society. One such example is the total absence of alcohol, which is illegal according to *shari'ah*. Additionally, the Saudi weekend is Thursday and Friday because Friday is considered to be the holiest day. Finally, there is the requirement that shops and businesses close during the call to prayer, which occurs five times each day in accordance with *shari'ah* (Korany & Hillal Dessouki, 2009). While the call to prayer is apparent in other Muslim countries, it is believed that KSA is the only Muslim country in which businesses are required to be shuttered during this time, and may not reopen for business until the call to prayer has ended. These are only a few examples of the areas in which it is visible, but it is clear from these examples that the pervasiveness of the impact of *Shari'ah* in KSA can hardly be overstated.

The political system in KSA is another of the ways in which the country is unique. KSA is an absolute monarchy, meaning that its ruling family, the Al Saud, and particularly the King, have monumental political power over the country. According to the design of the Saudi system of government, this power is tempered by the existence of the Consultative Council and the Council of Ministries. The Consultative Council is equivalent to the United States' legislative branch of government, and the Council of Ministries is essentially made up of the King's cabinet members (of which one is the Minister of Education, along with many others). However, this

temperance of power is perhaps somewhat undercut by the fact that it remains the sole province of the King to make and change the law (Chapin Metz, 1993).

The King is not entirely free in this regard, however, as the King must act at all times in accordance with *Shari'ah*, Islamic law, which serves as the constitution of KSA. No “modern” constitution has ever been written in KSA (The CIA world, 2012). One other important governing body must also be taken into consideration when discussing the political system of KSA, the *Ulema*. The *Ulema* is a group of powerful religious leaders or clerics who function as the equivalent of the judicial branch of the government of KSA. They operate the system of courts that uphold *Shari'ah*. As will be discussed later in this paper, tensions exist between these various factions, especially when it comes to reform efforts both in education and other areas of Saudi life (Allam, 2011).

Previous to the establishment of the formal education system, elementary education in KSA was housed primarily within the mosque. Called the *kuttab*, this system was largely informal and was limited primarily to the study and memorization of the Quran (Alamri, 2011). Also, it was available almost exclusively to boys, whereas girls may or may not have had opportunities to study inside the home (Al-Abdulkareem, n.d.). *Halaqat*, a similarly informal system of optional education beyond the elementary level, offered those who wished to continue their studies instruction in the areas of “Islamic jurisprudence, Arabic language, Quranic commentaries (*tafsir*), parables (*hadith*), literature, rhetoric, and sometimes arithmetic and history” (Chapin Metz, 1993, para. 1-4).

During the first phase of the establishment of the formal Saudi education system, enormous numbers of new schools were opened across the country making education available to many more students. In 1950 there were 196 *kuttab*-style elementary schools in the country,

942 teachers, and 23,835 students. By 1974, the number of formalized elementary schools was 1,917, with 18,380 teachers and 364,651 students (Al-Zaid, 1982). In addition to greatly expanding the number of schools, elementary and secondary education were made free for all students (who, at the time, were all males) and the first tertiary-level institution in the country, Riyadh University (previously King Saud University) was established in 1959 (Alamri, 2011). In 1975 a separate governing body, The Ministry of Higher Education, was established to oversee tertiary-level education ("About Saudi Arabia," 2012).

The Saudi government accomplished these feats in part by establishing the Ministry of Education, thereby replacing the previous General Department of Education. This new government body was given sweeping control over every aspect of every level of education from building schools and determining curriculum, to monitoring scholastic progress and training teachers, and it was also allocated a significant budget to do so (Al-Zaid, 1982). The new Ministry also carried on what was seen as the essential function of the previous body, the determination and implementation of the system's goals. These goals, revised in 1980, include numerous mentions of Allah, The Prophet Mohammed, and Islam, and they state that the foremost priority of the Saudi education system is to "strengthen faith in god and Islam, and in Mohammed (peace be upon him) as prophet and messenger of god" (Al-Abdulkareem, n.d., p. 16).

As is made clear above, the "modernization" of the Saudi education system has not meant a move away from the religious and moral education that was the center of the *kuttab* system. In fact, the current system has maintained most of the character of its the mosque-based predecessor and, rather than replacing its religious curriculum entirely, has opted instead to add other areas of study. The new Ministry of Education created a more diversified curriculum that included

sciences, mathematics, literature, and art while still focusing heavily on religious instruction and the study and memorization of the Quran (Al-Abdulkareem, n.d.).

It cannot be denied that the formal Saudi education system has made astonishing progress since its inception in 1948 (Al-Abdulkareem, n.d.). In addition to the enormous improvements in the number of schools and the number of students mentioned above, there have also been improvements in the training of teachers, and the improvement of overall literacy rates. Eleven teacher-training colleges had been opened as of 1989 and the literacy rate rose from 15% for men and 2% for women in 1970, to 73% for men and 48% for women in 1990. (Chapin Metz, 1993). The movement towards a modern, international system of education in Saudi Arabia that is apparent today has its roots in a very informal system based almost exclusively on religious study, and maintains some of the same emphasis today.

### **Higher Education in KSA**

As mentioned above, higher education in KSA is overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and specifically by the current Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Khalid ibn Mohammed Al Ankary. In recent years, major efforts have been undertaken by the MoHE to expand and reform higher education in KSA. According to Krieger (2007), there were only 22 public universities in KSA in 2003 and since then “the higher-education ministry’s budget has nearly tripled...to \$15-billion, much of which has been spent on opening more than 100 new colleges and universities” (p.1). Additionally, in an effort to further modernize the higher education system, new emphasis on science and technology has emerged as a recent trend (Elyas & Picard, 2010). Further, in contrast to the gender segregation visible in all areas of Saudi life, the first co-educational University was also opened in KSA, though it remains the only such



example to date (Krieger, 2007). Huge strides have been made in accessibility and in the overall number of enrollees, but as will be seen below, issues still remain.

Although expansion and reform are clearly taking place, and increased expenditure on higher education is certainly notable, the pressures of tradition exert a dilatory effect on the reform process. In an overview of higher education KSA, Alamri (2011) points out that the most pressing problems currently facing the system have to do with the centralized nature of the oversight and control by the MoHE, the makeup of the faculty and particularly the dependence on foreign instructors, ongoing gender disparities and the lack of academic freedom (Alamri, 2011). Additionally, Elyas and Picard (2010) refer to the “hybridity” of teaching methods in KSA, stating that there appears to be an effort underway to modernize without letting go of outdated and antiquated teaching methods based largely on memorization and lecture, even in the context of a language class (Elyas & Picard, 2010). The tensions between modernizing higher education so that Saudi graduates can compete in the global marketplace, and the conservative, and some would say oppressive, religious and cultural environment continue to play out and the outcomes of these tensions will not be known for a long time to come.

### **Background of the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP)**

Full-time students currently studying in MELP’s Intensive English Program (IEP) come from over 20 countries, with Saudi, Omani, and Chinese students making up the three largest contingents. Students are in class between 20 and 25 hours a week, depending on what level they are placed in. Students are enrolled in MELP’s IEP in order to improve their English language skills and test scores in order to continue their education, usually at American colleges or Universities. Some students have degrees (both graduate and undergraduate) from their home countries, while others come directly from high school. As a requirement for participation in the

program, students must have at least 2 years of previous English education ("Application and registration," 2014). All classes in MELP's IEP are taught entirely in English and focus on a communicative approach to language teaching.

### **Overview of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program**

In recent years, the number of students from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) studying in the United States has increased dramatically. This increase is the result of the unprecedented inception of the King Abdullah Scholarship program (KASP) in 2005. Although the total number of students from KSA currently studying in the US is somewhat difficult to verify, it is reported by some sources to have jumped from 4,175 in the 2002/3 academic year, (before the advent of KASP) to 44,566, more than ten times that figure, in 2012/13 ("Saudi Arabia open," 2013). Other sources report that the total number of students studying abroad in any country as recipients of KASP has exceeded 80, 000 (Onsman, 2011) or is perhaps closer to 120,000 (Bukhari and Denman, 2011). Estimates project that the number of KASP recipients studying abroad in 2015 will reach 300,000, or 1% of the total population of KSA (Alhazmi and Nyland, 2013). In the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP) a similar increase in the total number of Saudi students is evident, and as a result, so is a major change in the demographic makeup of the student body of the IEP.

King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, current King of KSA, launched KASP in 2005. According to a background on the program written by Alhazmi and Nyland, the main goal of KASP is "to meet the needs of Saudi Arabia in relation to the development of a professional and academic workforce that would be internationally competitive" (2013). On a similar note, to quote the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education directly, the mission of KASP is to make KSA

“world-competitive in the work market and academic research” and to build a “high-caliber base in Saudi universities, public and private sectors” (King Abdullah scholarship program, 2010).

Although the Ministry of Education does not specifically mention high unemployment as a motivation for KASP, it seems likely that high rates of unemployment play a motivating role. The most recent available figures put the rate of unemployment at approximately 11% overall (*The CIA World*, 2012), and the rate is especially high among younger workers, for whom it is estimated to be as high as 40% (Looney, 2012). An in-depth discussion of the causes and repercussions of the unemployment problem in KSA is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the Saudi government is very aware of the problem, and has initiated policies aimed at improving the skills and qualifications of the Saudi workforce. It has also instituted quotas to increase the percentage of Saudi nationals (as opposed to foreign workers) in the workforce as a whole, a process dubbed “saudification” (Krieger, 2007). In light of these other efforts, and despite the lack of any specific mention of unemployment as a motivating factor, it may very well be the case that the KASP was founded in part to attempt to ease the potential tension that may be mounting on the part of the Saudi population in light of the high level of unemployment (Hilal, 2013).

In addition, some speculate that there are other unofficial motivations for KASP. These possible motivations include repairing KSA’s relationship with the West and especially the US post 9/11 (eleven of the fifteen 9/11 hijackers were Saudi nationals), transitioning to a less oil-dominant and more knowledge-oriented economy, and making Saudi society generally more open by encouraging the free flow of ideas and critical thinking in academia and beginning to dismantle *wahhabi* control of social policy (Hilal, 2013).

KASP has undergone its own dramatic changes since it began. The program has been officially extended twice, and the number of students participating has dramatically increased ("About Saudi Arabia," 2012). King Abdullah and the Saudi government continue to provide substantial financial support for the program and it will surely continue to evolve and change over time. However, the stated goals of KASP remain the same, and in an effort to better understand the situation as it exists now, this paper seeks to capture a snapshot of the current moment in time, from the perspective of the student participants.

### **Saudi Students Studying Abroad**

Redden (2013) surveyed a variety of sessions at the 2013 National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA) conference to look at how Saudi students studying at American colleges and universities were dealing with their new homes, and especially the major differences in the education system here as compared with that in their home country. The article focused a great deal on perceived cultural differences, which are described as challenging to these students. According to the article, these cultural differences included a dogged dedication on the part of the Saudi students to their families, which sometimes results in poor attendance, and a “predisposition to negotiation” (Redden, 2013, para. 4-11). The willingness and desire to negotiate for everything from grades to enrollment, was seen as a major disconnect between the Saudi students and the system they inhabit. As will be discussed later, this disconnect may result in confusion and feelings of unfairness on behalf of the students. Additionally, the article touched on some of the strategies that schools have used to deal with these challenges, including adapting their attendance policies, and offering what amounts to sensitivity training for their staff (Redden, 2013).

Alhazmi and Nyland (2013) examined the Saudi Arabian study abroad experience specifically as it related to students' perceptions of studying in a mixed-gender environment. They conducted their research in Australia, which also hosts a high number of Saudi students, and their study explored how the role of cultural identity shaped student perceptions of themselves and their study environment with regard to gender. Their study discussed how identity is formed and re-formed in a process wherein the individual and the environment respond to each other. In the case of the population in question, the article described how "the experience of Saudi students in a mixed-gender environment can be viewed as the interaction of the "Saudi-self" with the mixed gender context" (Alhazmi and Nyland, 2013, p. 352). Their research found that, for the five participants they interviewed, studying in a mixed-gender environment was difficult to adapt to at first, but that after an initial period of adjustment, they came to accept, or even prefer it. Some participants specifically mentioned that their experience studying in a mixed-gender environment had changed their perceptions of gender in general, and had made them more open-minded about gender roles, a point of view they planned to pass on to their children back home (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013).

Kholoud T. Hilal (2013) took a unique approach to examining the perceptions of Saudi scholarship students, comparing them to those of Emirati scholarship students. In the study, the social, political, and educational backgrounds of the two countries are first compared. Then, the study goes on to discuss the scholarship programs from the two countries, and explains how they differ and what their goals are. In the study, a total of thirty participants were interviewed about their perceptions of the scholarship programs, and, perhaps most interestingly, their perceptions of what the effects of the programs will be in the future.

Saudi students in the study expressed that the three major positive outcomes they anticipate of KASP are the import of new and modern ideas to KSA, the implementation of these new ideas for the benefit of their home country and its citizens, and the improvement of the higher education system. Saudi students in the study also cited a change in national identity and customs as their foremost concern with regards to the negative consequences they predict of KASP. The consumption of alcohol and the observance of Western holidays such as Valentine's Day were cited as examples of this shift. Participants mentioned that these examples of negative or taboo behavior would be deleterious to the nation when scholarship recipients return and spread their new and culturally questionable ways. They also mentioned that these negative behaviors would essentially embarrass those students who continued to adhere strictly to the customs of their home country. Beyond issues of identity and cultural heritage, economic factors were the secondary concern for Saudi participants. In particular, there was a concern that unqualified students may be using KASP as a "paid vacation" (Hilal, 2013, p. 205) and that KSA would fail to realize major economic benefits from the program.

Finally, in examining the participants' perceptions of what the long-term outcomes of KASP would be, Hilal found that participants believed that KASP would result in fewer foreign workers living and working in KSA, greater respect for Arabs and Muslims on behalf of the West, and a more educated nation of Saudi Arabia. The study states that "overall, Saudis tend to be optimistic about an overall improvement in Saudi Arabia as a long-term benefit descending from KASP. More interestingly, they are willing and looking forward to having a more open-minded society..." (Hilal, 2013, p. 207).

In an interesting study focusing on the role of motivation in the process of second language acquisition, Ali Ahmed Al Zayid (2012) examined how Saudi students' motivation

changed over time while studying in the United States. His study includes a detailed background on studying English in KSA, and explains that, according to his participants, low teacher quality and outdated, rote teaching methods are a few of the main factors for the lack of motivation described by his participants while studying English in KSA. In the United States, his study found that the five main factors that lead to changes in the participants' motivation over time included the learning environment in which they were studying, the role of the teacher, economic factors, standardized tests of English such as the IELTS and the TOEFL, and the presence or absence of a motivating person in their lives.

The study focused on the temporal nature of motivation, and put great emphasis on how and why it changes on a short-term, even daily, basis. That being said, the study also found that in general, the participants' levels of motivation were higher in the United States than they were in KSA. Four of the factors mentioned above were perceived as predominantly positive motivating forces. With regard to the learning environment, participants pointed to the English-dominant society, as well as the ability to make direct connections between in- and out-of-class uses of English as motivating forces. When they discussed how the role of the teacher affects their motivation, the participants indicated that having a native speaker of English as their teacher was very important, as well as the communicative and student-centered nature of their classes. In their discussion of economic factors, the participants indicated, perhaps surprisingly, that the KASP paying for their tuition and living expenses actually made them more motivated. They reported that they viewed the scholarship as a "golden opportunity" to learn English in the best possible environment (Al Zayid, 2012, p.79). Finally, the motivating person as a factor could be a native English-speaking friend to be imitated, a teacher who offered support and guidance, or a family member who stressed the importance of learning and setting goals.

The IELTS and TOEFL tests, which are used as gatekeeping devices for admission to colleges and universities, were seen as a decidedly demotivating factor by the participants. The participants in the study reported that they did not believe these tests to be accurate measures of their actual proficiency, and that they found them to be highly demotivating because they created intense feelings of anxiety and insecurity. As described by one participant, the TOEFL exam was a “nightmare that created motivational anxiety and huge motivational changes” (Al Zayid, 2012, p.80).

Two somewhat parallel studies by Al-Sheikhly (2012) and Heyn (2013) examined the experiences of female and male Saudi students, respectively. In her study, Al-Sheikhly found that female Saudi students studying at Oregon State University developed high levels of intercultural competence despite, or perhaps even because of significant differences between their home culture and that of the United States. She also found that these female students exhibited high degrees of motivation and a strong desire to use what they have learned (linguistically and otherwise) to return to their home country and improve outcomes for women there (Al-Sheikhly, 2012).

Heyn (2013), on the other hand, examined the experiences of male Saudi students studying in the United States. She explored their perceptions of the United States prior to their arrival, their experiences living in the United States, the strategies they used to negotiate the culture as interlopers, how and why they sought out support (and if they were able to find it), and the effects of their experiences on their values and beliefs. Her study finds that the participants had both positive and negative perceptions of the United States prior to arriving. Their negative perceptions included a feeling of apprehension about violence and racism, and concern about being able to freely and easily practice their religion. Their positive perceptions included a belief



that the education they would receive in the United States would be far superior to what was available to them in their home country, as a result of better teaching methods, better trained teachers, and greater access to technology. In addition to their negative and positive perceptions, Heyn also noted that the participants reported the neutral perception that they didn't quite know what to expect upon arrival.

In her exploration of the participants' descriptions of their experiences in the United States, Heyn found that the students almost universally reported having experienced trouble related to their language proficiency and that they felt embarrassed about their language skills. Participants also reported experiences dealing with ignorance and racism on campus, and the challenge of living independently for the first time. Participants also reported that their main sources of support were their professors, other Saudi Arabian students, their religion, and their family.

Finally, the participants in Heyn's study reported that their perceptions and even their values and beliefs had undergone significant changes as a result of their experience studying in the United States. The major areas in which they reported changes are their ideas about women, their sense of duty to represent their country positively, their level of respect for people from other cultural backgrounds, and their trepidation about returning to their home country (Heyn, 2013).

### **Saudi Students Studying in Intensive English Programs (IEPs)**

In general, little has been said about the experiences of Saudi Arabian students studying in IEPs. Although the population in question has ballooned dramatically in recent years, it is possible that the academic research community simply has not had adequate time to catch up. Alternatively, it is also possible that the available literature suffers from some trepidation about

making generalizations about a specific population. Whatever the reason, what follows is a summary of what literature there is to be found on the topic of Saudi students, and specifically KASP recipients, studying in IEPs.

Not long after the advent of KASP, Bollag (2006) offered an initial explanation of KASP, a description of what effects it was having on IEPs, and some perceptions of the recipients. The article stated that IEPs were, in some cases, caught off guard by the sudden jump in the number of applications, and that the recipients of the scholarship were perceived as having relatively low writing proficiency, and relatively high speaking proficiency, a common perception of Arabic-speaking students in general (Bollag, 2006).

Giroir (2014) reported on a case study involving two male Saudi Students studying in an IEP in the United States. The article used a poststructuralist approach to discuss the ways in which the two participants negotiate their identities as Muslims from the Arab world, and particularly as “outsiders.” The article also focused heavily on how the participants constructed and reconstructed their identities in the face of what they perceived as racist and xenophobic attitudes on the part of some members of the host community.

Giroir’s study found that both participants actively engaged in constructing their identities, seeking to position themselves as unique individuals, rather than as representatives of their nation or their culture. She also found that although both of the participants reported that the people they encountered in their daily lives in the United States were overwhelmingly friendly and open-minded, that they both perceived the occasional hostility they had experienced to be an indirect result of 9/11. Finally, in discussing the dynamic power relations that shaped the participants’ identities, Giroir stated that “although we should not downplay the powerful social forces that unfairly marginalized these learners, those that were critical to their identity practices,

the findings show evidence of learner agency” (Giroir, 2014). This suggests that, although dominant and normative forces were at work to define these students as ‘Other,’ that they were actively working to define themselves as well.

In a study focusing on Saudi learners in an IEP in KSA, Eid Alhaisoni (2012) examined learning strategies use by EFL learners. In the article, Alhaisoni first gives background information on second language acquisition and specifically the use of learning strategies. Then, various types of strategies such as direct and indirect are explained and further delineated. The further delineation divides the strategies into five sub-groups: memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies. The article goes on to describe the study itself, and the means of data collection etc. Data for the study was collected from 701 participants at the University of Ha’il in KSA, by means of a fifty-item questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The study found that, in general, learners at higher proficiency levels were more likely to use strategies in their learning. It also found that, although other similar studies have shown differences in the number of strategies used by male and female students, that no such difference existed in the population studied. The article then goes on to suggest that strategies need to be explicitly taught to students at lower proficiency levels in order to encourage their use among learners (Alhaisoni, 2012).

In her Ph.D. thesis, Shaw (2009) explores Saudi IEP students’ perceptions of the differences between the American and Saudi education systems and the strategies they use to cope with those differences. She points out that Saudis in general, and especially their successes (as opposed to the issues they face), are underrepresented in the current literature. Shaw interviewed and used a photo-elicitation method with 25 participants at an IEP at Oregon State University and found that the two major themes present in the data collected are resilience and

development of intercultural competence. She posits that these two traits defined success for the students she studied.

When asked about what they perceived to be the points of difference between the Saudi and American educational systems, students pointed out many areas of difference. Some of the most prominent were in the areas of teaching methods, relationships with teachers, lack of negotiation, mixed-gender vs. gender segregated classrooms, and access to technology. Students indicated that their classes in the United States were very student-centered and involved a great deal of interaction and collaboration. Conversely, students reported that their classes in KSA were very teacher-focused and involved primarily lecture and memorization of material. Students also said that they perceived their teachers in the United States to be very friendly and approachable, whereas in KSA they indicated that their teachers were perceived as authority figures who were above them socially. Perhaps relatedly, students seemed baffled by the lack of negotiation available between them and their teachers in the United States. Multiple students suggested that they felt that they had a friendly relationship with their teachers, and were surprised when those same teachers were unwilling to make accommodations for them when they were sick or overwhelmed. This was in contrast to the students' descriptions of negotiating with their teachers in KSA, which they said was not only common but also expected. Students also pointed to the mixed-gender environment in which they were studying in the United States as a major difference. Multiple students mentioned both having opposite-gender classmates and opposite-gender teachers for the first time. Lastly, students celebrated the availability of technology in their studies in the United States. They compared this with their home country, saying that most everything would still be done by hand in KSA, and that the availability of

computer labs and other technology had a positive influence on their learning in the United States.

In order to ascertain what strategies students used to be successful learners, Shaw (2009) used interviews and focus groups, and calibrated for the students' definitions of success. In analyzing the results, Shaw found that the "strategies that the participants discussed tended to fall into several categories: time management, planning, and goal setting; study skills; study groups; campus resources; and persistence and hard work" (Shaw, 2009, p. 165).

To date, KASP has been in existence for 8 years and yet the existing research on how KASP recipients perceive their experiences and what successes and challenges they experience is very minimal. The scope of this paper will be, in ways, both narrower, and broader than what is currently available in the body of research. The scale of the current study is small; the participants represent a sub-group within a sub-group, Saudi Arabian KASP recipients studying in the IEP at the University of Minnesota. Additionally, the participants' experiences are particular to one institution, thereby making this study relatively narrow. However, the examination of the participants' experience will focus quite broadly on what they have to share and what their experiences have been like, positive and negative, culturally and academically, challenging and successful, and in this way the project is relatively broad. This paper seeks to answer questions that the existing literature has not yet adequately addressed. Namely,

1. What are the goals of SACM scholarship students studying in an IEP in the U.S.?
2. What do these students perceive as being the greatest challenges they face and successes they achieve, linguistically and otherwise?
3. How does the programming at the IEP align with the goals of these students residing in the US for the purpose of studying English?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The 11 participants in this study were all either current or recent students in MELP's IEP. The participants were almost evenly divided between men and women: 6 males and 5 females. They ranged in age from 19 to 28. Some of the participants had already completed a bachelor's degree in their home country, but most had not. The length of time that the students had been living and studying in the U.S. ranged from about 5 months to about 16 months. In terms of their English proficiency, participants ranged from Level 1 (High-Beginning) to Level 4 (High-Advanced), representing scores on the Institutional TOEFL of roughly 373-550. When the interviews were conducted, six of the participants were either current or former students of the researcher, and five were not.

Criteria for participation were established by the researcher. All participants needed to be from KSA and either current or recent full-time students at MELP's IEP. "Recent" students were determined to be students who had studied at MELP during the previous academic year. Participants also needed to be studying at or above Level 1 (High-Beginning). This threshold was established because the lower English language proficiency of any potential participants below Level 1 may have interfered with communication during the interview process. Additionally, participants in the study had to be recipients of KASP. KASP scholarship status was self-reported during each of the eleven interviews. Participants were not compensated for their participation.

Participants were recruited via email by MELP administrative staff on behalf of the researcher. In addition to email recruitment, flyers were also handed out by MELP instructors in order to recruit participants. Recruitment also occurred by word of mouth among the student

population at MELP and some participants were recruited by other participants who had already completed their interviews (see Appendix A for email recruitment language and flyers).

Table 1 below offers brief insights into each participant and his or her background and goals, with a given pseudonym. These pseudonyms were assigned to the participants following their interviews and were used in all subsequent documentation, such as transcripts and excerpts. The researcher has chosen to include this information in order to maintain the localized and contextual nature of the resulting research, and also to allow the findings to be easily attributed to the individual in question.

Table 1. Participant Background Information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Length of time at MELP (in months)	Level in MELP (0-5, if current student, or equivalent if not current student)	Previous education	Educational Goal	Total years of English study
1. Abdullah	23	M	5	1	BA	MA	15
2. Mohammed	19	M	5	1	High school	BA	10
3. Maryam	25	F	5	4	BA	MA	12-15
4. Ahmed	19	M	4*	1	High school	BA	10
5. Hamed	19	M	4*	1	High school	BA	7
6. Zahra	24	F	15	2	BA	MA	6
7. Malik	27	M	6	1	MA, in progress	MA, PhD	5
8. Fatima	28	F	7	1	BA	MA	6-7
9. Bayan	23	F	6	2	BA	MA	6
10. Aamina	24	F	12	4	BA	BS, PhD	11
11. Fahim	22	M	7	3	Associates Degree	BA, MA	10

\*indicates that the students studied for a given number of months at MELP before transferring to another institution.

## **Role of the Researcher**

It must be recognized and acknowledged that the researcher herself played a role in the collection and analysis of the data to be discussed below. The researcher played a fundamental role during all phases of this study, and the present paper is the result of this intervention. The design of the research questions, the data collection, the asking of the interview questions, and the analysis of the resulting data all exist because of the researcher and the relationships that the researcher had with the participants; none of this exists in a vacuum. At the time of the data collection, six of the eleven participants were either current or former students of the researcher. It was, in part, these very relationships that allowed this study to proceed, and those relationships undoubtedly shaped the outcomes. Additionally, the researcher herself entered into this study with some knowledge regarding the population and the participants, and while every effort was made to rely on the participants' own perceptions for analysis, the interaction between the researcher and the participants served as the means of obtaining those perceptions. The present study is generally qualitative in nature, but does not adhere altogether strictly to this label. Rather, it can be seen as the product of the interaction between three elements: 1) the researcher, given her investment in the topic, 2) the participants, given their the relationships with the researcher, and 3) the lens of the research questions discussed above.

## **Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews with each of the eleven participants. These interviews took place during November and December of 2013. Each interview lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour and was conducted on the University of Minnesota campus, in a small, private room. With two exceptions, all interviews were conducted in private, with only the participant and the researcher present. The two exceptions to



this were made when two participants requested that a friend be present during the interview. It is the belief of the researcher that the presence of these friends did not hinder the free flow and exchange of ideas and opinions, and has been noted only to provide an accurate picture of the data collection environment.

Before each interview began, the researcher obtained informed consent by means of a consent form and a brief discussion of the project, the methods, and the risks and benefits of participation. Because all of the participants were English language learners and some had relatively low English proficiency, before obtaining consent, the researcher did multiple comprehension checks with each of the participants to ensure that they understood what would follow and to allow the opportunity for any questions to be asked. All potential participants gave consent, and so all were included in the study (see Appendix B for consent form).

Each interview consisted of ten standard questions that were asked of all participants, and any other follow-up questions that came up as a result of the interview itself. Table 2 below lists the 10 questions that were asked of all participants.

Table 2. Standard Interview Questions

1.	Demographics: age, gender, length of time in U.S., previous study (general, i.e. BA, MA, etc.), previous English study (years, hours per week)
2.	What are your educational goals? What do you want to be able to do with English? Why is English important to you; how will it help you achieve your goals?
3.	How has studying English in the U.S been different from your previous study (in your home country)?
4.	What skill has been the greatest challenge to you (linguistically)? For example, speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, or more specifically, verb tenses, kinds of activities, etc.
5.	What other (non-linguistic) challenges have you faced? What has been most difficult in your education process as a scholarship student?
6.	What have been your greatest successes? (linguistically and otherwise)
7.	What is the most helpful to you in working towards your goals? Linguistically? Culturally? Academically? Other?
8.	How has the King Abdullah Scholarship gotten you closer to your goals?
9.	What goals have you achieved so far? How has studying English at MELP gotten you closer to your goals?
10.	Are there any ways in which MELP and/ or the scholarship program could help you more with your moving towards your goals?

Each interview was digitally recorded by the researcher using Audacity®, a free, downloadable software program for recording and editing audio files, and transcribed using a content-focused approach. Grammar mistakes were not corrected unless they were perceived by the researcher to interfere directly with meaning.

### **Data Analysis**

The transcriptions produced from the interviews were analyzed using the online data coding software program Dedoose™. Using Dedoose™, excerpts of each interview were coded by assigning each one with one or more themes. These themes arose from the content itself, and

were not determined in advance. Additionally, each excerpt was assigned to one or more of the three research questions stated above.

Once the codes had been determined and assigned, the researcher looked closely at the results, in order to ascertain which codes were used most frequently in response to which research questions. However, frequency was not the only criteria. In adherence with qualitative analysis guidelines, the researcher also looked for any results that were interesting or surprising, or that confirmed, ran counter to, or simply related to any of the results of the studies discussed in the Literature Review (see Appendix C for full list of codes).

In order to test the reliability of the codes and the coding assignments performed by the researcher, a reliability check was performed. This was accomplished by means of supplying the codes and an excerpt from one of the interviews to an outside party familiar with the field of ESL teaching. Codes were assigned to the excerpt by this person and were then compared to the original coding performed by the researcher. The percentage of codes that were the same in both samples was 92%.

## Findings

The findings of the data analysis are listed according to which research question is addressed. They are also listed under headings referring to the themes by which they were coded. They are labeled to indicate each participant's pseudonym, gender, and age.

### **Research Question 1: What are the goals of SACM scholarship students studying in an IEP in the U.S.?**

#### **English for Future Study**

The participants generally had specific ideas about continuing their education after completing their studies at MELP. Most knew what field they wanted to study and what sort of degree they wanted to earn, and a few knew which school they wanted to attend.

Fatima, F, 28: I want to get a masters degree in nutrition...maybe I will get this degree from the University of Minnesota"

Hamed, M, 19: "I wanna go to college and study chemical engineering... I think I would like to stay at St. Thomas."

Aamina, F, 24: "I want to complete my education. I want to get a Master's degree and Ph.D. also if I can and I want to, in stem cell research and maybe in neurobiology."

When asked about how English will help them in their future, most participants focused their answers on their professional careers rather than their academic ones. Those who did address how English would serve them in their future education gave broad answers like Bayan's below.

Bayan, F, 23: "I like English very much because I think it's good for my education to learn about English and it's very famous to learn English to complete my masters degree and maybe Ph.D."

## **English for Future Employment**

The participants' ideas about what sort of work they would do and how they would use English in their future careers varied widely in terms of specificity. Some students appeared to have very clear pictures of their career paths and how English would be involved, while others seemed unsure of how they would use it. Although their goals in terms of employment varied widely in terms of fields and how sure they were about what they wanted to do, virtually all participants stressed the importance of English for their future careers. Some, like Ahmed, even mentioned that having a mastery of English would allow them to advance faster in their chosen careers than other employees lacking adequate language skills.

Zahra, F, 24: "At that time I will go with teaching English, because some schools and some places they won't accept you if you don't have English. If I have English I will use this directly, of course, everything in English."

Maryam, F, 25: "I think that I have to speak and in English and write good papers and it's a requirement for all the professional jobs in KSA. If I get a job in the future, it will require English."

Ahmed, M, 19: "I want to work for the biggest company like Aramco, the oil company, and Sadara, it's the biggest company for chemicals. [English] help me to have a job. Because there's a lot of American people in these companies so I can speak with them, and if I have a, if I finish at the University here, and if I study at a good University, they will give me high grade like maybe advisor or something, like someone who has worked for maybe 20 years or something, but if I come with this degree I will be his advisor."

Malik, M, 27: "I would like to be a teacher, professor...of Islamic Law."

Fatima, F, 28: "I will go back home and maybe I will try to get a job in a hospital or something related to nutrition."

Bayan, F, 23: "I will be a teacher in my hometown in the University so I can teach my major in University."

### **“First Language:” English for Travel/ as a Lingua Franca**

Several participants indicated that their goals involved using English for more than just work or study. They talked about wanting to go anywhere in the world and communicate with other people using English as a Lingua Franca. They also mentioned the idea that English is the “first” language in the world, meaning that it is the dominant language for business, travel, and general communication.

Ahmed, M, 19: “Well, you know English is the first language in the world. So, you need to do everything with English, computer is English, the internet is English, when you travel to different country you have to have English to live there. For example when you go to a hotel or if you want to buy something you have to have English because they don’t know your language. And also English is easier than other languages. Like Arabic is so hard, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish. English there’s specific grammars. Like just grammars and words and you will speak it.”

Zahra, F, 24: “you can go outside your country and learn English and communicate with all the world.”

Malik, M, 27: “I would like to travel around the world, so I need to speak English. I would like to be volunteer so I would like to have language so I can help people.”

Fatima, F, 28: “Because if we travel anywhere, English is the first language that all the people speak, so I think English is important for communicating.”

### **Research Question 2: What do these students perceive as being the greatest challenges they face and successes they achieve, linguistically and otherwise?**

#### **“Home stuff:” housework, transportation, social interaction, etc.**

In discussing the challenges and successes the participants had experienced, many mentioned aspects of independent living such as cooking, cleaning, navigating public transportation, and managing their own time. Most participants referred to these issues as having been an initial challenge for them upon arrival, but having later been perceived as a success, once they became accustomed to their lives here in the United States.

Fatima, F, 28: “This experience teach me how I can depend on myself, and I don’t have anyone to help me like in KSA, and here I pay for my apartment by myself and I look for a place for myself, so it’s difficult for me in the beginning but after I have been here for 6 months I learn how to ask people. I learn how to do everything for myself.”

Abdullah, M, 23: “The other things are, the home stuff: cooking, laundry. It’s hard for me because I’ve never done it.”

Mohammed, M, 19: “Public transportation.”

Zahra, F, 24: “Now I can live alone. Because when I came here, I live alone. When I lived in my country, I thought that maybe I couldn’t do it. Maybe I would come here and after 1 month I would call my dad and say ‘I changed my mind! I want to go home!.’ But that is something that surprised me, that I can live here alone and I don’t want to go back right away.”

Aamina, F, 24: “In my country I didn’t have a plan for my time, sleep all day and wake up at night. But here I have learned to be on time and to wake up early.”

One exception to this trend was Ahmed’s comment that independent living was not a problem for him because he was used to camping in the desert at home in KSA.

Ahmed, M, 19: “Actually for us Saudi guys, it’s not problem, because we have the desert and when we have break, we can go there and stay for 1 week, 3 weeks, and not family, just guys. So it’s no problem when we come here, because we know how to care for ourselves. And also there’s many Saudi guys here, and usually we go to be with them and we help them, they help us.”

### **Support system/ homesickness**

Some participants discussed missing their families and the challenge of being so far away from them. They also mentioned having a support system, sometimes of other Saudi students but also of friends in general, as being a great help to them in coping with the stresses of living and studying abroad.

Ahmed, M, 19: “I’m not sure if it’s challenging, but if you study here without anyone from your family or friends... you don’t have anything to do except study for your class and in the weekend if you have time to do something fun. But the hard time is when you miss your family and your home.”

Hamed, M, 19: “I have my friend with me and he helps me sometimes. I like that.”

### **Critical thinking**

Although the term “critical thinking” was not expressly mentioned by any of the participants, some of them appeared to be indicating that being asked to share their opinion in a classroom setting was challenging. Both Mohammed and Abdullah indicated that expressing oneself in the classroom was unfamiliar and challenging to them at first.

Abdullah, M, 23: “Here I can talk. My country just I receive.”

Mohammed, M, 19: “Maybe in my hometown, I don’t give anyone my opinion, but here people want to listen to my opinion.”

### **Diversity/ cultural exchange/ stereotypes**

Engaging with people from a wide variety of cultures was definitely seen as a success for many of the participants. Some participants indicated some initial trepidation about interacting with people from other cultures, but then went on to describe how they had overcome it. For example, Abdullah described how he was uncomfortable at first, but then he made a conscious choice to interact with people from other cultures. Others focused on interactions between men and women, which was definitely perceived as a challenge. Malik seemed to feel that this particular issue continued to be a challenge for him in terms of how to observe his customs without offending anyone, whereas Bayan seemed to suggest that she had essentially mastered how to deal with it.

Abdullah, M, 23: “Like, in my class, like the someone from other country, at the beginning, I don’t talk to him. And after, during the summer vacation, I thinking about it and I change it, because we will be separate groups if we do that.”

Ahmed, M, 19: “American, Japanese, Chinese, some Arab people that I don’t know their culture. Mexican, my roommate is from Mexico. Yeah, yesterday, there’s nice family, they invite us to show us what they do on Thanksgiving.”

Zahra, F, 24: “Yeah and it’s not just American culture. Because I have some classmates who are Chinese and maybe I can learn some of the Chinese culture and a little bit of



information about Mexican culture. It's good! When I was in my country I didn't know anything about the world, but when I came here it's different."

Malik, M, 27: "For example, touch the woman, shaking hands. There are a lot of people, who don't know that I can't do that."

Researcher: "So you have to find a way to say 'I'm sorry but I can't shake hands with you.'"

Malik: "Yeah. "

Researcher: "Anything else?"

Malik: "Mix between girls and boys."

Researcher: "That is definitely very different. Is that challenging both in the classroom and also outside the classroom?"

Malik: "Both, yeah."

Bayan, F, 23 "Maybe talking to boys. [laughs] because in my home country it's not allowed, now I can communicate with any boys. It's like there is a red line between a boy and a girl, and I know where my line is."

Quite a few participants mentioned classroom diversity or lack thereof as a major factor in their success as a language learner. Each time this issue came up it was very apparent that the participants universally believed that having a diverse classroom with students coming from many cultural and linguistic backgrounds would be beneficial to their language learning and the study abroad experience as a whole. Mohammed and Maryam indicated that they felt this sort of diversity was lacking either in their classes or in other classes in the program.

Mohammed, M, 19: "Actually, the classmates, all of them is Arab. Arabic, Arabic, more time to speak English. Change the classmates for more countries."

Maryam, F, 25: "There is a problem that it couldn't be solved. Especially in some classes, in some level, most of the students from the same country and speak the same language and there's no difference. People in the class being separate, Chinese and Arab. Maybe you can control that by the structure of the section, like you can mix it. I think especially for the lower level."

Ahmed was the only participant to approach the topic of culture and diversity from the opposite perspective. He focused on how he was being perceived by others in the community and how he represents himself both as an individual and also as a Saudi.

Ahmed, M, 19: “King Abdullah, when he give us the scholarship to come here to study, many people want to study, so they understand many things, they understand other cultures and when they go back to KSA they will do something better.”

Ahmed, M, 19: “And also we are here to explain us and our culture. Many people think, not Arabic people even, specifically Saudi people they are live in desert with oil! They are rich. No we have oil, but it’s for different people. And all of them think we are, you know what’s happened in the past and all of them they have bad idea about us [referring to 9/11]. And everything happened, you will hear in the news, ‘they are Saudi people.’ Yeah, also it’s hard for us here. When you go in a taxi or whatever and they ask you where are you from and you say I am from KSA, some people will be afraid. Yeah, I think that it’s important for everyone to...explain himself.”

### **KASP/ SACM**

Participants had remarkably positive feedback regarding the KASP itself. They all indicated that they felt very well supported by the program and by SACM (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, which administers the scholarship in the U.S.) and that they were very thankful for having opportunity to study at MELP. Participants generally seemed to agree that KASP allows them the freedom to pursue their interests, and supports them in their endeavors.

Malik, M, 27: “First, it’s sent me here, and let’s say for example when I want to change my English school or my country that I want to study in, it’s okay, it’s possible for me. When I go to take the IELTS test, they buy for me the fee.”

Ahmed, M, 19: “Everything is done by the scholarship. Because they will pay for school, they give you salary, you know how much they give us? \$1850 a month, it’s good to live on. Everything is done with the scholarship. And if you have a problem here, like if you have to go to the doctor, they give you, what’s it called? Insurance. And if you have a problem with the government they come to help you from Washington or from Houston.”

Aamina, F, 24: “They work hard to make sure that we are safe here, and they connect with us every day. I think it’s a good program.”

The only major challenge related to KASP mentioned by the participants had to do with the length of their scholarship study. Multiple participants indicated that the 1-1 ½ years allotted to them for the purpose of studying English is simply not enough, especially for those who begin their studies at the lowest proficiency levels. Participants referred to the semester schedule, the

summer program and level advancement policy, and the length of the breaks as particular issues in relation to the length of the scholarship program.

Ahmed, M, 19: “MELP is good to study in, but they teach you and they take long time with the grammar they give you lots of practice to understand how to use it. But, I don’t want to say, but the wrong thing here is 4 months for each semester it’s a long time. Our government scholarship gives us to study for 1½ years, so 4 months, 4 months, and 4 months, so you will stay here for 2 sessions and then you will be done. And also, the thing that make me change is the summer semester, all my friends, all my cousins they study at other schools and they are level 1, and in the summer they are level 2, after summer, in the fall, you are level 3. But here, if you study in the summer, it would be still level 2. And it’s a long time..”

Maryam, F, 25: “I have just one comment. It’s not in my case, but what I see here, like maybe the period of the semester, like 4 months for one course for some people it’s a problem because for some people they come here and they don’t have that skill for level 1 or even pre-level 1 and maybe they take 1 year, and the scholarship give them like 1 year or six months extra, sometimes they request extra time, and they don’t get accepted. Maybe they couldn’t because of the time limit. So some people maybe prefer other places for this point.”

Hamed, M, 19: “I think it’s a special for the students and when the students study in MELP, the scholarship should give him a long time because it’s between school and school, because when you study at St. Thomas, you just need 12 months to finish studying English, but here when you start at Level 0, you need two and a half years.”

Hamed, M, 19: “And, like the summer break and summer classes, it’s a big problem for us. We have like 3 ½ months but you can’t pass on to the next level, you just study and nothing.”

### **Classroom environment/ skills**

In discussing their successes and challenges, participants mentioned all four of the major skills areas (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) as well as grammar and vocabulary. The range of attitudes and opinions was vast here, participants’ responses were individualized and reflected the personal nature of the interviews. The excerpts below are labeled with either “challenge” or “success” in order to further differentiate the responses related to each of the linguistic skills and strategies.

### ***Reading***

Success: Zahra, F, 24: “Maybe reading. Before, I couldn’t find the main idea and details information, and that’s so important, it’s maybe one of the most important skills in reading. And now I can, because the teacher told us about some strategies for how to find the main idea, and when I did it I felt like ‘yeah. I can improve.’ Before, when I did it, I felt so nervous, because I want to learn but I don’t know how. But now that I know that strategy, I can do it.”

Success: Fahim, M, 22: “Maybe the book group, because we discuss our opinion and our answer in the group and sometimes give new vocabulary to the group. And sometimes we give the real-life connection to the story.”

### ***Writing***

Challenge: Abdullah, M, 23: “when the teacher asks me to write something in a short time. I can’t.”

Success: Abdullah, M, 23: “Write an essay, yeah when I write it has improved. Before I came here I could write just maybe 30 words in a paragraph, now I can write maybe 300.”

Challenge: Maryam, F, 25: “Sometimes I thought like I write everything and my instructor told me that this is not a good word choice, it does not express, I don’t think that it expresses what you want it to express what you want to say. Or the grammar I choose. And sometimes being unclear for a reader. And I think writing is important for me at least as I complete my study. It’s hard.”

Challenge: Aamina, F, 24: “sometime the teacher need specific type of essay and when I write how I usually write they told me ‘no, it’s not right. You have to do it again.’ Last time I had to change it four times.”

### ***Listening***

Challenge: Zahra, F, 24: “I think listening because I think it’s important, if you can listen then after that you can write something or read something and I think for me, yeah, it’s listening.”

Success: Abdullah, M, 23: “Yeah, it’s improved. Maybe if I watch movie, maybe I understand about 75% without subtitles.”

Challenge: Malik, M, 27: “For example, my teacher, they give us some information about statistics, or people talk with native language like not for textbook, sometimes it’s difficult.”

### ***Speaking***

Success: Hamed, M, 19 “First, in MELP, I like my presentation I do it here. That’s the first thing to help me improve my English, to help me to speak with people.”

Challenge: Maryam, F, 25: “I take pronunciation class, I thought it will help me but even if you know the rule, it doesn’t help. Maybe I need some practice for myself. Even if I know the rules, it won’t work.”

Success: Fatima, F, 28: “I have more opportunity to speak and I can improve my ability to understand other people when they speak fast and I learn that in my class and I feel comfortable when people ask me for directions and I answer, but when I came here I listen and say ‘I don’t understand, I don’t know.’ But now I feel comfortable.”

### ***Vocabulary***

Success: Fatima, F, 28: “I think in class we study a lot of vocabulary especially for nutrition and I understand that and I feel like I can do a lot of search for vocab in this degree and also in hospital, I can learn a lot of things, this semester I learned about nutrition and obesity and how we can teach the people to keep our life in the right way and healthy lifestyle.”

Success: Aamina, F, 24: “Yeah, for example, for me, I think vocabulary is very helpful for me, so that’s what I need.”

### ***Grammar***

Success: Ahmed, M, 19: “For me, grammar is the key. Because if I, I like the grammar class because it’s like math. Like \_\_\_\_ plus \_\_\_\_ equals \_\_\_\_.”

Challenge: Fatima, F, 28: “Yes, sometimes I feel that I’m confused when I study grammar so I don’t understand very well, but I go home and I look for more information and I ask my teacher if I have any questions.”

Challenge: Researcher: “Which of those would you say has been the most challenging or difficult for you?”

Fahim, M, 22: “Grammar.”

Researcher: “Why grammar? Why do you think it's difficult?”

Fahim: “Because sometimes I don’t understand it and sometimes when I take a test I get confused, but I do my best.”

## **Interaction**

A number of participants mentioned interaction in their responses. This topic came up both with regard to in-class activities and out-of-class daily life. Participants indicated that their experiences interacting with both native English speakers (NS) and non-native English speakers (NNS) were challenging, but also fulfilling. This topic was portrayed by the participants as a major point of difference for them, as compared to their English studies in their home country.

### ***NNS-NS interaction***

Maryam, F, 25: "I don't know, I'm not as comfortable when talking with natives, like when I'm talking in class it's equal, but when I go out..."

Researcher: "You feel less comfortable?"

Maryam: "Yeah."

Aamina, F, 24: "Here I feel more serious and here I talk to people who have native language... People are more interesting, also you have experience because everyone here speaks English."

Aamina, F, 24: "First time, when I arrived, until now or even now, sometimes people don't understand me. I even think it's right, but they say they don't understand. It's very challenging for me."

### ***NNS-NNS interaction***

Abdullah, M, 23: "Ah, talk with a group, it's my first time."

Researcher: "So it's been difficult because you're not used to it."

Abdullah: "Usually when I talk with my friends, it's not a problem."

Researcher: "Do you think you've gotten better at that since you've been here?"

Abdullah: "Yeah."

Researcher: "I think so too. So you're getting used to it maybe?"

Abdullah: "Yeah."

## **Confidence**

One final theme that emerged as a huge factor in the participants' experiences was confidence. Many participants mentioned having a greater sense of confidence in their language abilities since arriving in the United States. Others discussed feeling more confident about living

independently and navigating the university's systems and policies. Others referred to a greater awareness of their own language abilities and opportunities for improvement.

Maryam, F, 25: "Mmmm, I don't know but, maybe...I recognize some of my weaknesses. I thought that I'm okay in something and now I know. I wasn't aware about this."

Hamed, M, 19: "When I speak, I can speak with people. In my country when I want to speak with someone I am shy, but when I came here I can speak a lot with the people."

Hamed, M, 19: "I think that it's a good idea when I study the first four months in MELP because the English in MELP is very strong and the first four months, when I went to another school I am ready to study because the English in the other school is not like the level 0."

Zahra, F, 24: "Ok, in English, maybe now I can talk a little bit with American people and I don't feel shy, but when I came here I don't talk with people because they ask me to explain and I can't explain. I can explain more than before I came here."

Fatima, F, 28: "This experience teach me how I can [long pause] depend on myself, and I don't have anyone to help me like in KSA, and here I pay for my apartment by myself and I look for a place for myself, so it's difficult for me in the beginning but after I have been here for 6 months I learn how to ask people I learn how to do everything for myself."

Bayan, F, 23: "It was difficult for me in the beginning. I was scared to go alone. One time my friend told me come to Caribou Coffee, to drink some tea and I said 'I can't my brother is sleeping' and she said 'don't wake him up, just come with yourself' and I thought 'I can't I'm afraid.' But now I take the bus and it's okay. In the morning, it's okay. In the night it's scary. The told us don't go out alone at night. Even in the emails we get from the U, it's true. My mom and dad said "don't go out alone" but it's okay, I said "I can do it mom, I can do it dad." and it's not scary. It's okay, but in the night it's not good."

Bayan, F, 23: "In the past I couldn't present with a speech in English, I know how to talk with Arabic, now I can. I feel more comfortable and confident. And yes, about the essay, I didn't know how to write it in the past. Now I can, but not that good."

### **Research Question 3: How does the programming at the IEP align with the goals of these students residing in the US for the purpose of studying English?**

Many participants referred to the connection they feel to the campus and the university as a great asset for them while studying in MELP. They indicated that they felt like they were a part of a larger community of students and that they had taken advantage of the connections available

to them by means of campus clubs and groups, as well as informal connections. They also mentioned that the prestige of the University of Minnesota made them feel proud and that they felt secure in the quality of their education because of the connection between MELP and the greater university system. Additionally, Zahra specifically mentioned wanting to continue her education at the University of Minnesota after finishing her studies at MELP. Participants seem to have indicated either tacit or implicit approval of maintaining and perhaps even strengthening the connections between MELP and the wider university community.

### **University/ campus connection**

Zahra, F, 24: “Actually the U of M is the strongest University, so I hope so. I hope to study here, but you know that they need the high score on the TOEFL or the IELTS, so maybe if I can’t get the high score I will change to another university. But I think Minnesota, I love Minnesota, but if I can’t maybe I will change.”

Maryam, F, 25: “I think the program being on the campus is helpful because you can contact anybody and ask about anything that comes to your mind. You can access the resource. If you study in another program in another institution, that is not related to the University it will be different.”

Mohammed, M, 19: “Actually, the education here is better than KSA. If I get my education here and come back to KSA I can find a job quickly.”

Researcher: “OK, so having an education from the US will do more for you than if you were to get your degree back home.”

Mohammed: “Yeah.”

Researcher: “Is it more prestigious or more important?”

Mohammed: “Yeah, like that. more important.”

### **Language practice**

The issue of language practice, and the amount of time devoted to it, came up as a major factor for the participants’ success in studying at MELP. Abdullah and Ahmed both mentioned that they felt that there was far more opportunity to practice using English here than in their previous study in their home country and they attributed their success in part to this difference. Malik, on the other hand, suggested that even more practice, during the lunch break between



classes, would further accelerate his learning. In general, participants agreed that the emphasis placed on allowing students adequate time to practice the language has been key to their improvement.

Malik, M, 27: “Okay, sometime they give us enough time to study, for example listening and speaking but some classes you need a long time. For example, I have every day break time for 2 hours. We can spend this time with our teachers reading and writing, that would be a better way to spend this time.”

Researcher: “So you would actually like to have more class?”

Malik: “Practice time, just practice.”

Abdullah, M, 23: (referring to English language study in KSA) “It’s not enough. Not like school, 5 hours in the day.”

Ahmed, M, 19: “It’s different [here] like your classes are really, like you can eat in class, you can say anything that you want to say. It’s good time, good practice. They give you a lot of practice, at home it’s like book, book, book, book. Here they give you more practice to understand what you will do in the future. In my country they give you practice, but not like here.”

### **Teacher quality**

In general, the participants point to the quality of the teaching methods in their MELP classes and the training and experience of their teachers as having been major factors in their success. In addition, many participants placed emphasis on their teachers being native speakers of English as a positive and even fundamental factor in their success as language learners.

Bayan, F, 23: “It’s different that here in the US it’s the main source of English but in my country all the teachers learn from maybe TV or music or maybe they travel to learn to teach, but in my country there’s no good teachers.”

Researcher: “So you would say that the teachers here are qualified, like all the teachers at MELP have at least a masters in teaching English, some of them have a Ph.D. even, and that would not be the case in your home country?”

Bayan: “Yes, that would not. Maybe in our country when I was in high school our teachers in English they have just bachelors degree, they just graduated from college and they didn’t learn English.”

Fatima, F, 28: “I studied English from native speakers and they give me the right information about how to speak or how to say this in English, in my home country it’s

different because they didn't give us the specific rule and they give us sometimes wrong rules."

Researcher: "Really?"

Fatima: "Yes."

Researcher: "And do you think that's because the teachers are not native speakers of English? Or because they are not trained properly?"

Fatima: "Yes, both."

Fatima, F, 28: "I like studying here because I think that this university is the hardest university and I appreciate that, and I like my teachers because they meet with me and they respect us, for all semesters and they help us a lot, and they give us a lot of information and feedback and this helps us also."

Aamina, F, 24: "Here I feel more serious and here I talk to people who have native language and here everyone wants to study English only, just English, and also the teachers here are very good, better than my country. Everyone is a hard worker, everyone wants you to learn and I don't think it's because they have to, but because they want to help people learn, more than in my country. In my country they have to so they're not interesting to learn from. People are more interesting, also you have experience because everyone here speaks English."

### **Administration**

Administrative policies regarding class schedules, visa status, and courses offered appear to be a major area where the participants perceive opportunities for improvement in terms of how well the program at MELP aligns with their goals. Maryam mentioned the challenge of attending class 5 hours per day in addition to studying for the GRE and taking a GRE prep class at another institution (there is no such class at MELP). Abdullah expressed frustration about the length of the lunch break during fall and spring semesters.

Maryam, F, 25: "Since I'm trying to apply, and it's hard as you know, I need MELP program and MELP classes but I have other stuff to do and I have no time."

Maryam, F, 25: "I will talk about one point, but I don't think that MELP can do something with this because since my visa rules and stuff I can take a specific number of credits because I have F1 visa, even though like, this class will not help me but I have to take it. Even I have a GRE course at another institution but I have to take both and I have to walk to both."

Researcher: "What about your classes or your schedule, anything like that that you feel could be better? Is 5 hours a day too much, not enough?"

Abdullah, M, 23: “Not enough. And the break is too long. Yeah, in the summer it’s better, it’s perfect. I can, but the time is good. I can pray.”

Researcher: “Because you get done earlier?”

Abdullah: “Yeah, but you know, 2 hours it’s too much. One hour is more than enough. I can eat my lunch and pray and that’s it.”

Maryam, F, 25: “More choices that would be helpful for me. Like there is academic skills class, it’s helpful for people they don’t have college experience, but for me it’s like [shrugs shoulders], you know?”

### **Teacher-student interaction and relationships**

The relationship they had with their teachers, and specifically the opportunity to ask for extra help or more explanation was indicated by the participants as a major strength of MELP’s program. Several participants indicated that they were able to interact with their teachers in a more open and even friendly way, and that this would certainly not have been the case in their home country. Ahmed seemed particularly focused on the idea of respect and seemed to indicate that an attitude of deference was required in his home country, whereas at MELP respect and openness were mutual between students and teachers. Aamina suggested that teachers allow students to guide their own learning more by asking for their input at the beginning of the semester, rather than waiting for the student ratings of teaching (SRTs) that come at the end of each semester.

Ahmed, M, 19: “Also here you have to respect the teacher but they are open with you.”

Ahmed, M, 19: “Yeah, if you want anything from the teacher you can ask him.”

Researcher: “And you think that's not the case in your home country?”

Ahmed: “No it is, but”

Researcher: “More so?”

Ahmed: “Like you have to respect him much more, and if you don’t respect him as much as he wants he will fail you.”

Aamina, F, 24 “I think that they should give the students this information and it would be easier. Also I noticed that the teacher gave us an evaluation for what helps you the most this semester, I think they should give us this at the beginning of class instead of at the

end. Maybe you have a way that help you but didn't help other people. For me what's helpful for this semester instead of next semester.”

## **Discussion**

### **Research Question 1: What are the goals of SACM scholarship students studying in an IEP in the U.S.?**

The majority of the participants in this study indicated that they have specific goals for their future education and employment. They plan to study and work in the areas of engineering, education, and healthcare, to name just a few. They all mentioned wanting to earn degrees in their chosen field, and nearly all of them indicated that they plan to return to KSA to work upon completing these degree programs. Many participants also pointed to English as a gateway for future travel and communication beyond the scope of either work or study.

With regard to their educational goals, none of the participants mentioned specific goals related to learning English. Although the participants did not mention English specifically when they described their educational goals, they did discuss the programs and fields they were interested in (nearly all of which would take place in the United States and would be conducted entirely in English), and several mentioned a desire to stay in the Twin Cities, or at the University of Minnesota, beyond their completion of the IEP program. This eludes to the generally positive attitudes the participants seemed to have towards the quality of the education they had received to date, as well as the wider community.

When discussing their employment goals, some participants had very specific ideas about what they wanted to do for work and how they would use English in their employment, while others seemed to have more general ideas about their futures. In general, the older students who had more previous educational experience had more specific plans. Malik, for instance, mentioned wanting to eventually pursue a Ph.D. and said that after that he “would like to be a

teacher, professor...of Islamic law.” Conversely, the younger, and less experienced, participants were less sure about their future trajectories. Several indicated the fields that they wanted to study in, but were less specific about the type of work they would do or how English would be involved. Ahmed, for example, indicated specific companies that he was interested in working for, but he wasn’t sure which field he wanted to work in, or in what capacity he would be employed. This disparity comes as no surprise when one considers the range of ages and levels of education completed by the participants. This shows that the Saudi population cannot be considered as a homogenous group. There are a wide variety of individual aspirations as well as a wide variety of personal backgrounds and experiences to be elucidated and drawn upon even within the small sample size of this study.

The participants’ conception of English as the “first language” in the world is also noteworthy. It shows that these participants have chosen to study English not only as a means to an end such as a specific field of study or level of employment, but that they also believe to some degree in the power of English as a global connector of people and ideas. Although their ideas about why English is so important globally seem somewhat vague, relying mostly on the axiom that it is “important” or that they will need it to “communicate,” it is clear that these participants view English as means of communication that will serve them beyond the classroom or the workplace.

In general, the participants in this study seem to have thought about their goals and what they will do next in their educational careers and beyond. Although their perceptions of the role of English in their education have perhaps been somewhat obscured by their current surroundings, they indicated that they had diverse and personally driven reasons for studying it. The participants described English as more than just a means to an end, they saw it as a way of

remaining connected to the world at large, through technology and travel, even after returning to their home country. For example, Ahmed mentioned that English would serve him in his future travels as well when using technology. He stated that "...you need to do everything with English, computer is English, the internet is English, when you travel to different country you have to have English."

**Research Question 2: What do these students perceive as being the greatest challenges they face and successes they achieve, linguistically and otherwise?**

The participants in this study referred to a wide variety of challenges in their responses during the interviews. With regard to the challenges they perceive in learning English, they mentioned specific language skills such as listening or giving presentations, as well as types of classroom activities such as giving their opinion in a discussion. Their responses in this area varied widely, and there were no universally challenging topics or answers among the group.

As mentioned earlier, it is a commonly held belief that students coming from Arabic-speaking backgrounds often have higher proficiency in their oral skills (speaking and listening) than they do in their reading and writing in English. While the study sample is far too small to argue against the validity of this belief regarding all Saudi students in the US, it is worth noting that the perceptions of these participants do not seem to match this assumption. Each of the participants indicated areas of language learning that they perceived to be particularly challenging, and although there were some areas that were mentioned numerous times, there do not appear to be any notable patterns present in the group as a whole that would indicate that their perceptions favor any one skill over another. This seems to go against commonly held assumptions.

Although there do not appear to be any noteworthy trends with regard to what the participants perceived as challenging with regard to their language learning, the quality of their

responses may be noteworthy in and of itself. The participants offered detailed and nuanced assessments of their own progress, and seemed to be intimately aware of the areas in which they want to improve. This demonstrates that both the quality of their self-reflections and their ability to express themselves in English are higher than what might be expected.

Although the communicative teaching style of the classes in the IEP does appear to have initially been a challenge for some participants, it is clear from their responses that they perceive the amount of language practice they engage in to be one of the major factors that has contributed to their success. The participants generally had positive feedback about the ample time and attention paid to actual language use in their classes in the IEP, whereas they had negative perceptions of the teaching methods employed in their home country. In the existing literature, there does not appear to have been any specific mention of this difference in teaching styles as having been a challenge for Saudi students. Perhaps because of the conservative forces at play and the focus on religious instruction in education in KSA mentioned earlier, learning in general as well as language teaching in particular in KSA seem to rely heavily on rote memorization and a lecture-based approach with very little interaction on the part of the students (Elyas & Picard, 2010). Adjusting to and ultimately coming to prefer a communicative teaching style appears to be one of the unique findings of the present research. While the perceived shortcomings of the Saudi educational system are outside the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy to consider the critical point of view from which the participants were able to evaluate their educational experiences both here in the US and in their home country, and their preference for the teaching approaches here in the United States.

Living independently and navigating the world and the university seem to have been perceived as being initially challenging for many of the participants. However, without

exception, those that mentioned these areas as a challenge also mentioned them as a success. Many of the participants seem to have felt empowered not just as students or even as international students, but also as adults. It is worth noting that these participants have had to adapt to an English-only environment, a drastically different climate, and a new and potentially confusing university system, all while, in many cases, living away from their parents for the first time. The transition into adulthood and independent living can be rocky for any young person, and the participants in this study seem to perceive their success in this area as a point of pride. This particular topic does not appear to have been addressed in the existing literature about Saudi students in IEPs. The negative aspects of this issue may simply be taken for granted. Is it perhaps assumed that Saudi students are experiencing culture shock and homesickness, like most international students. The positive experiences mentioned by the participants in this study with regard to this issue appear to offer a more complete picture of these realities from the participants' perspective.

The participants' desire to interact with people from other cultures and linguistic backgrounds may come as a surprise to some. Diversity among classmates and acquaintances, and the participants' ability and desire to interact with them was perceived as a major success for many students. Although the strict and some would say repressive background they come from is perceived as being remarkably culturally homogenous, the participants mentioned actively seeking out opportunities to exchange ideas with people from other cultures. The only participant to indicate any trepidation about interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds, Abdullah, described having a change of heart and making an intentional decision to actively seek out interaction with people who were different from him. The only participant to mention how this cultural exchange would effect KSA in the future, indicated that the new ideas and



influences currently being experienced by SACM recipients will have a positive effect in years to come. This shows that these participants see themselves both as representatives of their home country, and as future ambassadors of diversity when they return home.

The length of time allotted to the students by their scholarship organization for the purpose of studying English seems to have been perceived as one of the greatest challenges the participants faced. KASP recipients are given only one year, followed by a possible extension of six months, to complete their English language studies before enrolling in a degree program. If their proficiency does not meet the necessary requirements to be accepted to a degree program after their time runs out, they must return home. Proficiency at the time the scholarship is awarded is not considered as a factor; all recipients are allotted the same amount of time. For many recipients who enter the IEP at higher levels of proficiency, this amount of time is adequate. However, for those who enter the IEP at the lowest proficiency levels, this may not be enough time to improve their language proficiency to the point where they can be accepted to a degree program. Some participants indicated that they perceived this issue to be a challenge for themselves, while others indicated that they perceived it as a challenge for KASP recipients in general.

Similarly, the summer term at MELP and how it fits into the program as a whole was perceived as an issue for some participants. The summer term at MELP is considered optional, and the level advancement policy with regard to summer term reflects this consideration. One can conceive of the levels in summer (A, B, C, etc.) as fitting in between the regular fall and spring levels (1, 2, 3, etc.). In the typical level progression, a student who completes level 1 in spring would then go on to level B in the summer. Assuming that this student completes their Level B classes in the summer, they would then go on to Level 2 the following fall. However,

another student who completes Level 1 in the spring and chooses not to study in the summer would also enter Level 2 in the fall. In the case that a student completes level B in the summer and scores high enough on the final assessment to be placed in Level 3, he or she is given the option to ‘skip’ a level, proceeding to Level 3.

It seems, based on the opinions expressed by Hamed and Ahmed, that this optional summer study, and the inability to advance beyond the normal progression upon completing it, is frustrating to the participants. The summer term has been described by MELP teachers and administrators to students as an excellent opportunity for extra language practice, and possibly, as discussed above, an opportunity to skip a level (by jumping from B in the summer to 3 in the fall, for instance) but it seems that in the case of these participants at least, this description falls on deaf ears. They see the summer program as a waste of time, and since they are often bound by the rules of the scholarship to stay for the summer, they resent their inability to progress more quickly through the levels, which is somewhat understandable given the short amount of time in which they must matriculate according to the rules of KASP. That being said, student perceptions of this particular issue may, in some ways, be misguided. Institutions that organize their courses into shorter terms and more levels (1-10, for instance, as opposed to 1-4) may give students the impression that more progress is being made in a shorter period of time. In this case, it is the responsibility of each institution to ensure that students understand how their system of levels might compare to those at various other institutions, and what expected rates of progression through those levels typically entail, as not all students progress through those levels within one year.

Improved confidence was perceived by nearly all the participants as a success. Participants almost universally indicated that their confidence both inside and outside the

classroom had improved dramatically as a result of their experiences. With regard to language in particular, participants indicated that, likely as a result of the communicative teaching style at MELP and the ample opportunities they had to practice the language, they felt more comfortable interacting in everyday situations. This increased confidence will likely serve these participants well as they continue to progress in their language learning and beyond.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, it is worth noting that many participants indicated that the same skills or other topics that they perceived as challenges, were also seen as successes. Many of the participants indicated that they perceived a certain skill, such as writing, for example, to be the greatest challenge for them. When asked about what they saw as their greatest successes, they often referred to the same skill again. The same was true for the participants who mentioned independent living, and for those who talked about confidence as well. This indicates a high degree of self-awareness on the part of the participants, and also shows that they are able to see their own progress, which is not always easy for language learners. Perhaps Maryam described this phenomenon best when she said “I recognize some of my weaknesses. I thought that I’m okay in something and now I know. I wasn’t aware about this.”

**Research Question 3: How does the programming at the IEP align with the goals of these students residing in the US for the purpose of studying English?**

It may be surprising to some to realize how much the participants in this study consider themselves to be a part of the community at the University and how much they value that sense of belonging. Participants indicated this sense of belonging in connection to their friends and support systems, their respect for the University of Minnesota as an institution and the quality of the education available here, and their desire to stay on here beyond their time at MELP. Perhaps because of the religiously and culturally conservative nature of their home country, there may

exist a belief that Saudi students mostly interact with each other, or that they fear or reject other cultures, or that they cannot or will not adapt to the host culture, but the findings above indicate that the exact opposite is the case. As Malik stated, “I have to become comfortable. But also I have to preserve my culture.” The findings in this study confirm those in the previous literature regarding the dual pressures of personal adaptation and cultural preservation such as those in Alhazmi and Nyland (2013) and Hilal (2013) that indicate that Saudi students studying abroad actively work to assert their identity as individuals, and do so in a dialogic relationship to their national identity and their surroundings.

In the existing literature on the Saudi student population, a great deal of research is devoted to the issues of adaptation to a mixed-gender environment. Alhazmi and Nyland (2013), for instance, found that students went through an initial period of struggle in mixed-gender environments, before coming to eventually accept or even prefer them. Similarly, Heyn (2013) and Al-Sheikhly (2012) found that both male and female Saudi students came to adjust their beliefs and assumptions about gender roles as a result of having studied in a mixed-gender environment.

In the current study, the issue of gender was, for the most part, conspicuously absent. Only a few of the participants mentioned the mixed-gender environment as a challenge. Malik mentioned that it was and had continued to be a challenge for him but that he was dealing with it by means of asserting himself and his needs in a culturally respectful way. Bayan indicated that inhabiting the same space as men was initially difficult for her, and went on to say that she had learned to navigate the issue by determining where her comfort zone was and how to communicate her boundaries to others. With the exceptions of these two examples, the topic was otherwise altogether absent from the interviews. Perhaps the participants in this study have

simply already adapted to studying in a mixed-gender environment and as a result the topic did not warrant mention in their interviews. Alternatively, perhaps they were better prepared for this particular challenge as a result of improved pre-departure orientation. Whatever the reason, the issue of the mixing of genders is predominantly notable for its absence in the data collected for this study.

The limitations of the class schedule and courses offered appear to be an issue for some participants. Maryam in particular indicated that she would prefer to have more choices about the classes that she takes and the flexibility of her schedule. She said, “More choices that would be helpful for me. Like there is academic skills class, it’s helpful for people they don’t have college experience, but for me it’s like [shrugs shoulders], you know?” Here, she is suggesting that the limited options in terms of what classes she takes are too restrictive. Also, Abdullah was particularly concerned with the class schedule and the length of breaks, which he saw as too restrictive. He said he that the one-hour break provided during the summer would be preferable to the two-hour break provided during fall and spring.

Making changes to the class schedule or adding additional classes in order to provide more options for students is not a process that can be undertaken easily or quickly, but as the IEP program continues to grow and adapt to increasing enrollment and demographic changes, these suggestions are worth bearing in mind. Moving forward, taking the opinions and suggestions of the student body in general into account will help to ensure that MELP acknowledges and meets the needs of individual students from various backgrounds. The participants in this study seem to indicate that the issues they perceive in this area have to do with the variety of courses offered, the scheduling of these courses, the length of the lunch break, and lack of additional informal practice. MELP has already made steps to address the issue of informal practice by organizing

“culture talks,” informal discussion groups that meet during lunchtime as a way of offering cultural connection and extra language practice outside of class time. The other issues are permeated by such considerations as budgets, classroom space and scheduling, and curriculum, which are all well beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that, taking this feedback into consideration, continuing to offer greater student choice and a variety of options focused on addressing the needs of individual students, while also maintaining programmatic integrity and high standards, ought to remain at the forefront as MELP continues to evolve.

### **Limitations**

Perhaps one of the greatest limitations of this study is the small and localized sample from which it was produced. Because the sample size was quite limited and because the pool of participants was drawn from a single location, larger assumptions about the Saudi population in general cannot be drawn from this research. That being said, there exists a vacuum of information when it comes to research examining Saudi SACM recipients in IEPs, and this study takes at least a small step towards remedying that situation.

Another limitation of this study is the self-selected status of the participants. Each of the participants in the study volunteered to participate, and it seems likely that those IEP students who would volunteer to participate in such a study might be more successful, and they might have generally more positive perceptions about the program than the student population in general.

Further, as mentioned earlier, the researcher herself may in some ways be seen as a limiting factor in the study. The researcher is female, and it is not outside the realm of possibility that her gender may have influenced the responses of some of the participants. Additionally, the

researcher was either the current or former instructor of many of the participants at the time of the interviews and that prior relationship may also have had an effect on the responses.

### **Implications for Teaching and Administration**

Perhaps the most important lesson to be taken away from this study by teachers and administrators is that taking the time to learn about students' goals, successes, and challenges can produce meaningful, useful, and varied results. While a study of this nature would obviously not be plausible in a classroom context, simply taking the time, near the beginning of the semester, to learn about what the students have to say can inform our practice as teachers. A simple questionnaire would go a long way towards making sure that student's voices are heard, and it could bring to light issues or challenges that we might not even be aware of. Because they make up such a large contingent of our students, or perhaps because this trend is a relatively new one, it might be tempting for teachers and administrators to make generalizations about the Saudi population. Drawing conclusions about 'what Saudis are like' or 'how they behave' may ultimately be unavoidable, but we can actively strive to eradicate such biases by learning as much as we can directly from individual students, and by allowing them to speak for themselves. This study shows that when we allow students to speak for themselves, and when we take the time to get to know them as individuals, it becomes clear that there are as varied and as unique as any other group.

Additionally, keeping in mind some of the challenges mentioned here, such as the length of the scholarship program, or the lack of familiarity with standard classroom activities, may help teachers and administrators to remain sensitive to their students' needs as well. We simply cannot assume that our students know what we expect from them, nor can we assume that we know what they expect from us. A frank and open discussion about what the expectations are,

and an ongoing dialogue on the topic would seem to aid this process. Communicative language teaching has reached such an accepted status within the field of ESL, that it may be challenging for teachers to keep in mind that our students do not necessarily come from a background where this is the case. Avoiding making assumptions about what types of activities students have done and what may or may not be a challenge for them, and instead engaging in a dialogue directly with the students to learn about how we can best serve them, would seem to go a long way towards bridging these sorts of gaps.

Although programmatic policies cannot and should not be changed specifically for this population, ensuring that students understand the policies is essential to their success. As indicated above, many of the participants in the study perceive the length of their scholarship study to be an issue. So, making sure they understand how advancement through the levels works and how long it might take to achieve their goals, ideally before they even arrive in the U.S., might help to ensure that those who choose to study at MELP have taken these policies into consideration. Similarly, as mentioned above, the summer term and the level advancement policy are perceived as issues for students, and although they are in no way being questioned here from a policy perspective, it would behoove teachers and administrators to ensure that students understand the policies, and the reasons behind them.

Finally, and perhaps most broadly, keeping in mind that our students are not just learners of English, but whole people who are also living and studying in a challenging environment, missing their families, and defining themselves as adults, may help us to remain sensitive to their needs, and continue to allow us to make meaningful connections with them. Because many participants indicated that their relationships with their teachers were a major factor in their success, I would stress that we ought to continue to make these sorts of connections and to



continue to strive to take advantage of the connections themselves for the purpose of furthering student learning.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The current study begins to address the many questions that need to be asked about Saudi SACM students studying in IEPs in the United States. Further assessments of their language learning, their perceptions of their own progress, and their transition into college and university beyond the IEP are only a few of the areas that remain for further study. Additionally, now that SACM recipients are starting to finish their studies abroad and return to KSA, further research ought to be done on what the effects of the program are on the former recipients and the nation as a whole. Finally, a version of the current study could be conducted in other similar institutions in order to establish if similar trends are present in order to make determinations about the broader population of Saudi SACM recipients in IEPs.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has addressed a gap in the existing literature by examining the experiences of Saudi KASP recipients studying in an IEP. It has also indicated some of the lessons to be learned from the experiences the students have shared regarding their lived experiences, their preferences, their strengths and weaknesses, and the successes they have achieved as well as the frustrations and difficulties they have encountered. By allowing the participants to speak for themselves, this paper has given voice to these students and informed the field of ESL teachers and administrators, and especially those working in the context of the IEP at MELP, with regards to the goals, challenges, and successes these students have experienced. Drawing on the perceptions the participants have shared, this paper has indicated some of the ways in which we

can continue to take their experiences and their opinions into account moving forward, thereby enriching our practice and helping to ensure continued success on the part of our students.

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## **Appendix A: Recruitment Materials**

### **Recruitment Flyer Language:**

#### **Research Study Opportunity!**

- Are you a current or former student at the Minnesota English Language Program?
- Are you from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?
- Are you willing to share your experiences as part of a research study?
- Are you 18 years old or older?

The purpose of this study is to learn about the challenges and successes of Saudi students who are studying English at MELP. Participation is totally voluntary (not required) and your identity will be protected. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher (Leah Kronick) and engage in a one-time interview focusing on your experiences as a student at MELP. The interview will take about 20 minutes.

If you are interested, or if you have any questions, please contact Leah Kronick at [kron0062@umn.edu](mailto:kron0062@umn.edu)

### **Recruitment Email Language:**

Good afternoon,

My name is Leah Kronick and I am a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. I am writing today to tell you about an opportunity to participate in a research study. To determine if you can be a part of the research answer the questions below:

Are you a current or former student in the Minnesota English Language Program?  
Are you from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?  
Are you willing to share your experiences as part of a research study?  
Are you 18 years old or older?

Did you answer 'yes' to all the questions? If so, you may participate in the study. Read on below for more information.

The purpose of this study is to learn about the challenges and successes of Saudi students who are studying English at MELP. Participation is totally voluntary (not required) and your identity will be protected. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with the researcher (Leah Kronick) and engage in a one-time interview focusing on your experiences as a student at MELP. The interview will take about 20 minutes.

If you are interested, or if you have any questions, please contact Leah Kronick at [kron0062@umn.edu](mailto:kron0062@umn.edu)

## **Appendix B: Consent Form**

### **Consent Form**

#### **Saudi Arabian Scholarship Students in MELP's IEP: Goals, Successes, and Challenges**

You are invited to be in a research study of Saudi Arabian scholarship recipients studying ESL in the Minnesota English Language Program (MELP). You were selected as a possible participant because your home country is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and you are a current or former student at MELP. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Leah Kronick, MA candidate in ESL

### **Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to learn about what challenges and successes are perceived by Saudi students at MELP, and to make connections between those experiences and the rules and policies of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and of MELP's Intensive English Program (IEP).

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: engage in a brief (about 20 minute) interview conducted by me, in which you will describe your experiences as a student learning English, and allow this interview to be digitally recorded and transcribed (written down) at a later date.

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study**

The study has no risks to you and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

There are no benefits to participation in this study.

### **Compensation:**

None. You will not be compensated (paid) for your participation in this study.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you as a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records. Only I will have access to digital recordings and transcriptions of interviews, and all recorded data will be deleted within 1 year of participation.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota or the MELP. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### **Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: Leah Kronick and. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at my office in 160 McNamara Alumni Center, (612) 624-1503, or kron0062@umn.edu. My advisor on this project is Dr. Michael Anderson, and you may also contact him at his office in 160 McNamara Alumni Center, (612) 624-1183, or ande1819@umn.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher or her advisor, **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

### **Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix C: Research Questions and Codes**

- 1. What are the goals of SACM scholarship students studying in MELP's IEP at the University of Minnesota?**
  - a. English for Future Employment
  - b. English for Future Study
  - c. "First Language:" English for Travel and/ or as a Lingua Franca
- 2. What do these students perceive as being the greatest challenges they face and successes they achieve, linguistically and otherwise?**
  - a. "Home stuff:" housework, transportation, social interaction, etc.
  - b. Support system/ homesickness
  - c. Critical thinking
  - d. Diversity/ cultural exchange/ stereotypes
  - e. KASP/ SACM
  - f. Classroom environment/ skills
    - i) Reading
    - ii) Writing
    - iii) Listening
    - iv) Speaking
    - v) Vocabulary
    - vi) Grammar
  - g. Interaction
    - vii) Native Speaker/ Non-native speaker interaction
    - viii) Non-native speaker/ non-native speaker interaction
  - h. Confidence
- 3. How does the programming at MELP align with the goals of these students residing in the US for the purpose of studying English?**
  - a. University/ campus connection
  - b. Language practice
  - c. Teacher quality
  - d. Administration
  - e. Teacher-student interaction and relationships